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Dewrêşê Evdî – Dewresh, Son of Evdi

A Kurmanji Epic as Performed by the
Berazi Singer Baqî Xido

Edited and translated by Barbara Sträuli

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Preface

This book exists to make a good story better known. The quality and the tragic impact of the Kurmanji epic *Dewrêşê Evdî* as sung by Baqî Xido transgress regional boundaries. As a patriarchal hero tale, *Dewrêşê Evdî* takes its place among the other great sagas of folk literatures. It is packed with passion, conflicting loyalties, great speeches and a heroic battle, all of which are the stuff of novels, films and plays.

Chance afforded me the opportunity to research the background to this epic in Turkey. I had visited the region of Suruç regularly for family reasons when a friend drew my attention to a typescript in his possession. It contained the epic *Dewrêşê Evdî*, performed by the singer Baqî Xido and transcribed by his countryman from Kobanî in Syria, Şahînê Bekirê Soreklî. Baqî Xido, a Berazi Kurd, had learnt it before World War II. He belonged to the same tribal confederation as my contacts on the Turkish side of the border and he spoke the same southwestern Kurmanji dialect. His home in Syria had been only nine miles distant from Suruç. My contacts knew the singer, they were familiar with the story of *Dewrêşê Evdî* and they were interested to discuss his performance text with me. In the end the whole process took twelve years, including a phase of intensive research between 2002 and 2006.

Baqî Xido's *Dewrêşê Evdî* is the longest version of this epic extant and a variant of high quality. The singers of Kobani were especially good at creating long and verbally artistic versions of older variants. The *ode* of the Şahin Begs Berazi, the chiefs of the Berazi confederation in Kobani, had an artistic impact on the surrounding regions between the two world wars, which reached as far as the Kurd Dagħ and Afrin. Mişo Bekebûr (1889–1956) was their main singer at that time, while his pupil Baqî Xido (ca. 1918–1995) can be regarded as the last classical singer of this local tradition.

Like other Kurdish epics written down in the 20th century, *Dewrêşê Evdî* was transcribed by Şahîn Bekir Soreklî with little accompanying background information. Transcribing a long epic is an arduous task in itself, and Sorekli was writing for Kurdish readers and listeners. But the full meaning of Baqî Xido's performance is no longer accessible even to many Kurds. The action of his variant is set in the highly specialized nomadic society of the steppe, which vanished after World War II. Accordingly, my research was focussed on the first half of the 20th century when the singer had acquired and formed the epic, and on the years after the Second World War when nomadism was still practiced in the region. The result is a historical and bilingual edition, an in-depth semantic reading of the Baqî Xido's performance and a dense background description of the culture of the nomadic tribes as it is presented in the epic.

It is well known that the editing of an oral piece of folklore deprives it of important functions it has in performance. The strict rules of editing and the painstaking correctness required give the text of *Dewrêşê Evdî* a somewhat static aura it certainly did not have in a village performance. For Berazi audiences these performances were as transient as film screenings for town audiences before the invention of the Internet – at least my interviewees talked about them in a similar fashion. Although the singers were experts at arousing tragic emotions in the audience, their appearance in the village was an enjoyable event. They provided a welcome break in the rural monotony (I am speaking of the years up to about 1980). The reception of the singer in the *ode* and the time he spent in the assembly when he was not performing were filled with bartering news and witty verbal exchanges. Good singers were highly appreciated, but so were a whole range of other artists using language as their medium, such as professional tellers of jokes and anecdotes, tellers of fairy tales and the *duman*, wandering gypsies who performed little theatrical sketches in the village streets and sang derogatory songs on your neighbours if you paid them for it. If we take all these oral literary genres which existed side by side into account, we realize that the tragic genres represented by the big epics, melancholic long songs (*kilam*) and the *şîn* (laments for the dead) were only one half of the whole range of sung and spoken rituals or verbal entertainment available, the other half consisting in the comic genres mentioned and also a big treasure trove of collectively transmitted anecdotes and jokes told in the *ode*. Among my interviewees certain jokes villagers had practiced on each other 60 years ago were still told and retold.

In contrast to researchers like Christine Allison and Lokman Turgut who were forced by the difficult political situation to collect oral literature among Kurdish fugitives, I had the opportunity to talk to persons who were not displaced and whose tribes had settled several hundred years ago in the plain of Suruç. Although they were exposed to the usual assimilation practices by the Turkish state, they had an unbroken local and tribal history. A few weeks after I had finished the manuscript to this book, thousands of fugitives from the Syrian side of the border streamed into the Suruç plain. During my next visit in 2014 people told me that ‘nothing will be like before’, clearly aware of a radical and perhaps definite change in social dynamics. I had hoped that one day a complementary study of Berazi epics on the Syrian side of the border, in Kobanî, would be possible. Some of the sons of Baqî Xido and Mişo Bekebûr and other lovers of Kurdish folklore who knew the local traditions well had lived in that town. Now, after the destruction of Kobanî in winter 2014/15, their tapes and shellac records probably lie buried under heaps of concrete rubble. By a terrible twist of fate, this book has become a rare witness to the – literally buried – past of the Berazi singing tradition.